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Anniversary Issue

SEPTEMBER 1998
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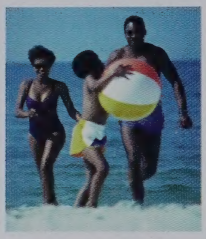
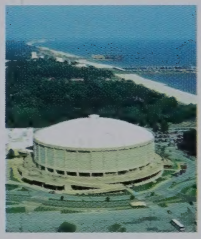
2nd Anniversary Issue

Interview with Members of the Dahmer Family

Harrison County





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MISSISSIPPI Star

VOL. 3 NO. 1 SEPTEMBER 1998

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Maurice and Georgia Singleton Celebrating their 50th Wedding Anniversary on August 8, 1998.
(Jimmy Loiacano, photographer)

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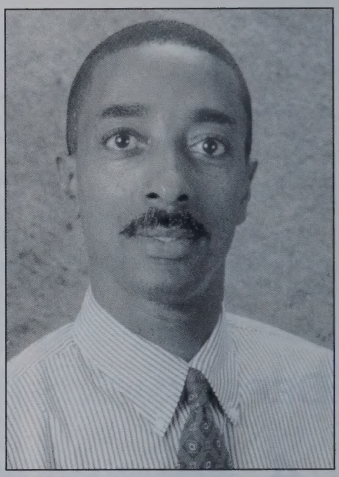

Anniversaries and birthdays are increasingly becoming more exciting events to me. Maybe it's because I'm past forty and I am beginning to realize that there is a possibility that the number of birthdays that I have had could well be more than the number of birthdays I have left to celebrate. Truthfully speaking, I don't know that I ever think about that. Maybe I am processing that thought subconsciously.

When I was in college birthdays weren't as important as they are to me now that I have my own family with children. In college it was easier for me to justify not going home for my birthday when I knew that I needed to work to pay the bills that I was accruing as a college student.

Having younger brothers and sisters who were still enjoying the thrills and excitement of a child's birthday celebration made it easier for me to yield to their needs. Being the fourth of eleven children, I understood that Mom and Dad were working very hard, and I didn't want to place a burden on them as they pursued their goals and supported the development of my younger siblings. And, in addition to that, they had taught me how to take care of myself, and I welcomed that.

Anyway, birthdays and our wedding anniversary are big events in my house. I have my wife to thank for that. She always makes sure we do something special for birthdays and our anniversary.

And so, I am doing something special for the second anniversary of *Mississippi Star.* In addition to a big celebration planned on September 24, I am paying tribute to my parents with this issue.

I am dedicating this, the anniversary issue of *Mississippi Star* to my parents, Maurice and Georgia Singleton who recently celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I am dedicating this issue to them because they always understood and they continue to understand. And also because

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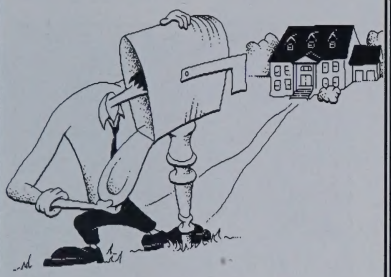
Mississippi Star is important to them. They always encourage me, and they always come over to help me with the labeling and mailing. And, they always ask me, "How's the next issue coming?"

A good friend told me that she thinks *Mississippi Star* is an extension of my parents and she believes that they must be very proud of *Mississippi Star*. That sounds good, and I sincerely hope that they are proud of what *Mississippi Star* is all about. The values of *Mississippi Star* - family, health, education, business and culture - are their values. These are the values they encouraged and strived to instill in us.

I hope that dedicating this issue to them is a worthy tribute.

To Mom & Dad

Happy Anniversary!



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Letters to the Publisher

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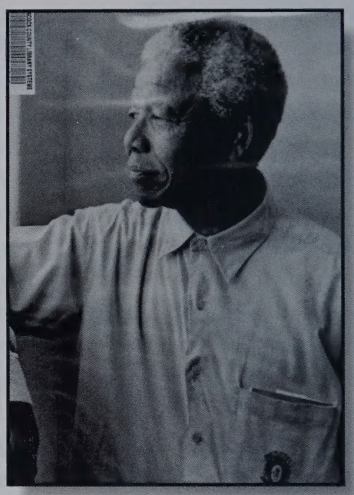
MANDELA: *An Illustrated Autobiography*

by Maurice E. Singleton, Jr.



MANDELA: AN ILLUSTRATED AUTOBIOGRAPHY takes the reader on a journey into the life of an incredible man who survived more than twenty-seven years as a political prisoner in South Africa and rose to that country's highest political office.

Mandela takes the readers from the childhood of Nelson Mandela in the 1920's to the day he walked out of prison in 1990. This is a play-by-play real life drama of a man who held steadfast to his mission, despite the long and harsh prison sentence and many other setbacks.

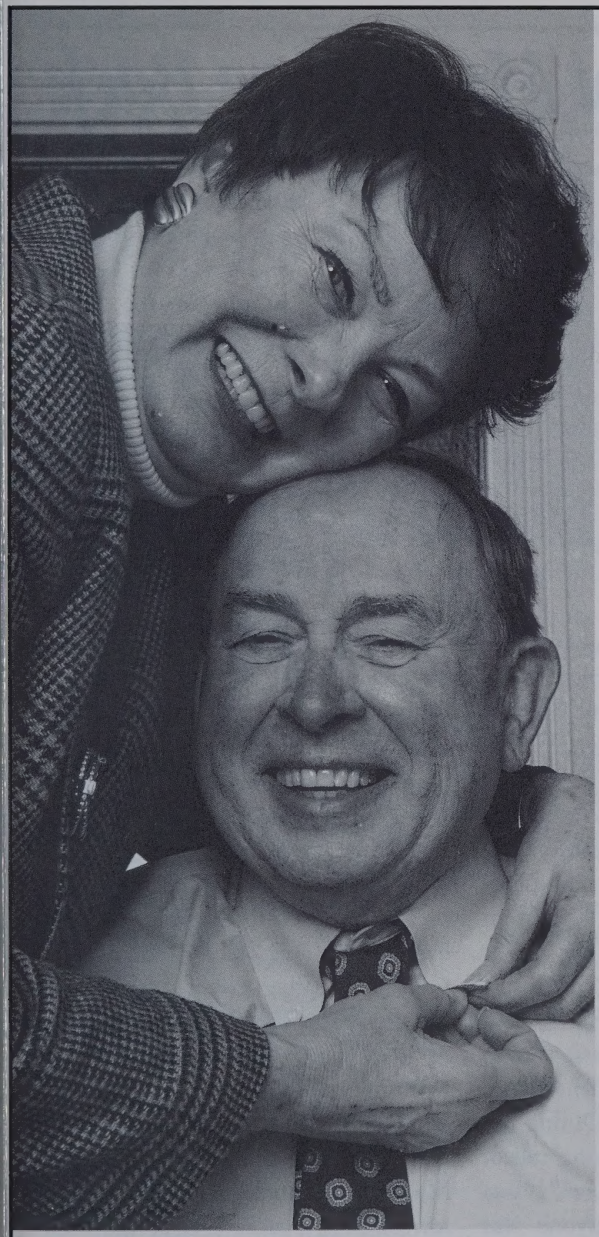
Apartheid in itself was inhumane, but the desperate measures those in power took to maintain this system took it to another level. For example, in the early 1950's, Mandela had been banned from attending African National Congress meetings or any other meetings during a six-month period. This also included a ban on him attending his son's birthday party.

Mandela's resourcefulness as a leader surfaces throughout his story. It appears that every time the government attempted to neutralize him, Mandela would find a way to maintain himself as a viable force against apartheid.

Because of his resourcefulness, eventually, the future of South Africa rested in the hands of an imprisoned Nelson Mandela as he maintained his integrity and values, praying for a better day in South Africa. Twenty-seven years is a long time to be denied one's freedom, however, Mandela left prison in 1990 more powerful a leader than he was in 1964.

Mandela explains how he kept himself together:

"The challenge for every prisoner, particularly every political prisoner, is how to survive prison intact, how to emerge from prison undiminished, how to conserve one's beliefs. I do not know that I could have done it had I been alone. But the authorities' greatest mistake was to keep us together, for together our determination was reinforced. We supported each other and gained strength from each other. Men react differently to stress. But the stronger ones raised up the weaker ones, and both became stronger in the process."



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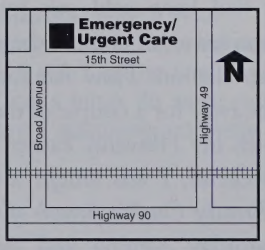

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How I Got My Groove Back

Stacey James Mackey

Do you ever get to a point where you feel run down? A state where the stresses of life get you spiritually depressed? I have two children under 18 months old. Sleep deprivation and crying babies can often be overwhelming. I occasionally lose focus under the pressures of trying to excel in parenthood, career and being a good wife. You moms out there may know what I'm talking about. I cried out to God for help. I needed my strength renewed. God got immediately to work.

God arranged for me to attend a spiritual retreat. I had heard about these special retreats put on by members of the Cedar Lake Christian Assembly Church of Biloxi, but I knew it had been sold out for months. I received a call because there had been a cancellation. How fabulous it was to get away for a couple of days just to be with my Heavenly Father. During my weekend, I was taught a song called, *"Breathe On Me Breath of God"*. It was Saturday evening and everyone was taking a break from the scheduled activities. The rain had just stopped and there was a clean smelling dew in the air. I sat in a rocking chair on a balcony overlooking the beach and prayed for God to breathe on me as the lyrics of the song said. I immediately felt a cool breeze flow over me and I inhaled as deep as I could. My exhale was slow and peacefully refreshing. I didn't want to release what had filled me. What a great weekend filled with so many spiritual life changing events. I left the retreat feeling like **MY STRIDE WAS BACK!!**

There's a verse in Genesis 2:7 that says "And the Lord God...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life..." Ezekiel 37:14 further adds "...I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live." With a gentle puff of His breath, God can breathe new life into us and restore our tired and worn out bodies. All YOU have to do is ask for it. So the next time the blues shadow your day, ask God to breathe the blues away. Stella (a character from Terry MacMillan's book and movie) got revived from a vacation trip, but Stella has got nothing like the groove I've got!

I hope I've given you something to pray about.

Something to Pray About

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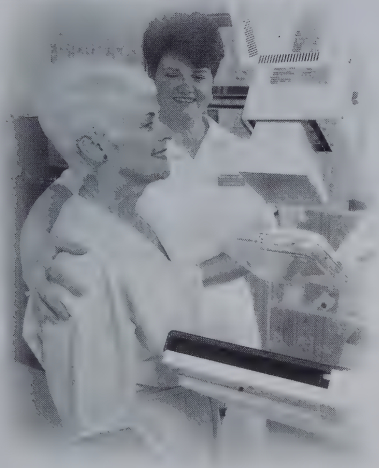

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What should I do?
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Special Tribute

During the Summer of 1947, while visiting Bay St. Louis, Georgia Mae Ellis of Morgan City, Louisiana, was introduced to Maurice Singleton by her friend Dorothy Stewart (Tyler). Following a year of courtship, Maurice and Georgia were married on August 8, 1948 in Morgan City.

On August 8, 1998, we celebrated their 50th Anniversary with a mass and reception attended by many family and friends. In the Anniversary Issue of Mississippi Star, we again say thanks to our parents for their unconditional love and many sacrifices. And a special thanks to all who helped us make that day special to our parents.

Best Wishes!

Glenda, Sharon, Rhoda, Maurice Jr., Shelly, Roderick, Cynthia, Craig, Carol, Gina and Dione

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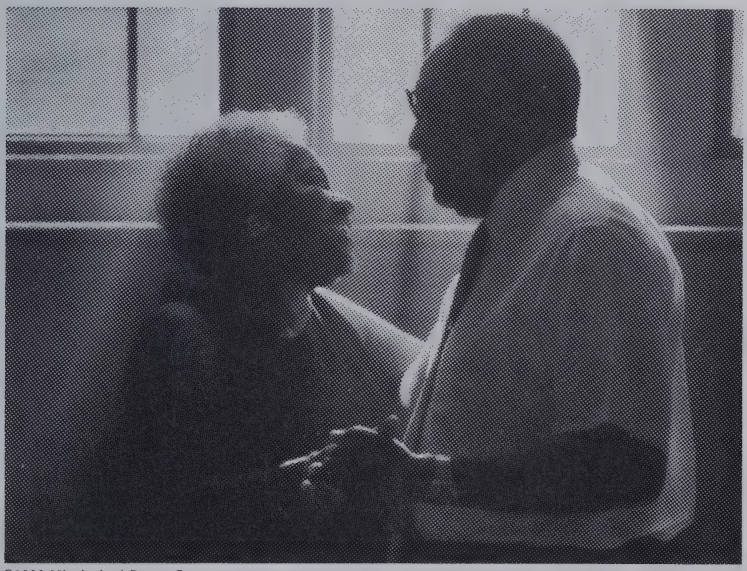

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INTERVIEW:

A Candid Discussion with Members of the Dahmer Family after a Favorable Verdict

The February issue of Mississippi Star included of a feature story about the family of Vernon Dahmer, Sr. as they approached the upcoming trial of the men who were alleged to have participated in the murder of their husband and father. Sam Bowers, a KKK leader was found guilty on August 21, and was sentenced to Parchman State Penitentiary at the age of 73, thirty-two and a half years after the death of Vernon Dahmer Sr.

We visited with members of the Dahmer family since the conviction of Sam Bowers. Members of the family were asked questions about the trial, the conviction and sentencing and how they are coping. The following are the candid responses of Ellie Jewel Dahmer, the widow of Vernon Dahmer Sr., and Bettie and Vernon Dahmer Jr., two of his children.

MS: Will you give us an overview of the trial of Sam Bowers, describing the mood and atmosphere in the courtroom?

Vernon Dahmer, Jr.: The trial of Sam Bowers began Tuesday (August 18), and it finally ended at 2:00 o'clock on Friday (August 21, 1998) with a guilty verdict. During the course of the trial, the atmosphere in the courtroom was somber. Very quiet. In some instances it was like being at a wake or funeral. It was unusual as far as I am concerned. I hadn't been to maybe just a couple of trials. But this one was different.

The testimony given by my mother, Bettie and Dennis had a tremendous impact on the jury. Bettie and Dennis were new witnesses. Back in the original trials in the 1960's, they were too young to testify. To me, they did a very good job describing what it looked like from children's perspectives back in those days. That in itself went a long way convincing the jury what happened and how it happened.

The most credible witness during the trial was Billy Roy Pitts. Billy Roy Pitts turned State's evidence back in the 1960's during the first trials. He was in the yard that night. He took part in the raid, and he lost his weapon in the front yard during the raid. The weapon was recovered the next day in the front yard by a law enforcement official. The weapon was then traced to Billy Roy Pitts.

He had been directly connected to the crime. So, for whatever reasons, he turned State's evidence. He testified against the klansmen who were indicted. During that period, fourteen klansmen were indicted for the crime, but only eight were present here the night of the crime. There were two carloads. One car stopped in front of the grocery store; four guys dismounted and set it (the store) on fire. The other car stopped in front of the house, dismounted and set it (the house) on fire.

Billy Roy Pitts' testimony back in the 60's led to four convictions, which we felt was a great, great victory back in those

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Mrs. Ellie Jewel Dahmer (center), widow of commnunity and civil rights leader, with Vernon Dahmer Jr. and Bettie Dahmer.

days. The district attorney of Forrest County at that time was James Finch, and the county prosecutor was Jim Dukes. Mr. Finch is now deceased; Jim Dukes is still practicing law in Hattiesburg. They did a courageous job in convicting the men who were brought to trial.

Sam Bowers escaped. His trial ended in a mistrial. After that, Bowers was part of three more mistrials in the late 1960's. After the mistrials, the case was moved into the records.

In 1991, when the Medgar Evers trial was coming to life, and it looked like it might lead to success, our family talked about it, and we saw a new opportunity. We thought we may have another chance to get Sam Bowers and the remainder of those who participated.

From 1991 up until this point, we have been diligent as a family. We've worked on everything that we could as a family to try to get into the court room. In the last two and half years, when the new district attorney, Lindsey Carter, came into office, we went down and talked with him after he was situated in his office. He promised to do whatever he could.

During this past two and a half years, he along with his assistant district attorney, Bob Helfrich, who prosecuted the case, also with the assistance of Bill East, the chief investigator from Mike Moore's office, who brought with him two more investigators who were assigned fulltime to our case, along with a lawyer from Mike Moore's office all worked diligently - long hours - putting this case together which resulted in a guilty verdict on Friday (August 21).

MS: What has the conviction and sentencing of Sam Bowers meant to the

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Dahmer family?

Mrs. Dahmer: At last we've been able to get what we were due in the 1960's. The evidence was there then. He should have gone to prison thirty years ago.

MS: What was the driving force behind your persistence for justice?

Mrs. Dahmer: After we saw what happened in the trial for the murderer of Medgar Evers, we knew there was enough evidence in our case. We had an eye witness. They didn't have an eye witness. If anybody knew what happened, Billy Roy Pitts knew what happened. He was there. He came out of Laurel or Ellisville with them and he went back with them. He knew who was there.

MS: How big a part did the jury votes in the two previous trials (11-1 and 10-2 in favor of conviction) play in your efforts to pursue a new trial?

Mrs. Dahmer: One time it was 10-2; we were almost there. Another time it was 11-1: We should've had that verdict. Only one person held out.

MS: How difficult was it to sit in the courtroom with Sam Bowers?

Mrs. Dahmer: You know I had been there before with them. This time I was able to stay in the courtroom and listen to the other testimony. Before, I would just come in and give my testimony and then go back to the witness room. I only got to see his face when I was on the stand. During the time others were testifying, we were in the balcony where we could look down and see what was happening. Our courtroom was situated where you could only see the back of people. You couldn't see what was going on. You could just hear what was going on.

MS: What was the feeling in the courtroom? Could you gauge which way the jury was leaning?

Bettie: Well, I thought I got positive vibes from members of the jury. I felt that if they were honest people, and if they were willing to weigh the evidence that was presented, our chances were better than good of getting a conviction. Basically, we had the same evidence with the exception of me testifying and Dennis testifying and a couple of other folks coming forward to say that they heard Sam bragging. See, we believed in the sixties that there was jury tampering, but of course it could not be proven. I was worried that that might occur again. But I felt that if these were honest people and that they were willing to weigh the evidence that was presented that we would have better than an average chance for conviction.

MS: You had been optimistic regarding the possibility of justice prevailing this time.

Why were you optimistic when all it took was one vote to find Sam Bowers not guilty for a third time?

Vernon Dahmer Jr.: This is 1998. Mississippi is a different place today than it was in the 1960's. I felt that if the evidence against Sam Bowers was equivalent to or better than the last time, the chances are that it would turn out in our favor. That gave me some optimism. The fear factor was lessened. Back in the 1960's, Sam Bowers was a powerful and a feared man. Sam Bowers was given free will, a free hand to go through the Black neighborhoods, burning, beating and killing as he chose. To me that is one reason why he always walked free. The jury was afraid of retaliation. In 1998, that fear is not as strong as it was back then. I'm not saying it's not out there. Let's face it, there are

hate groups that support what Sam Bowers stands for. The jurors were courageous Friday when they came back with a guilty verdict, which tells me that they were committed to doing the right thing. So when I look at all those things, I thought the chances were better for a fair trial this time than any other time. Now it's not that the evidence wasn't presented during the first trial, there were just some obstacles out there that prevented it from happening.

MS: What effect, if any, did the defense attorney's antics play in the outcome of this trial? (Note: Sam Bowers attorney called for a mistrial when a witness identified him as someone he had seen at a Ku Klux Klan rally.)

Vernon Dahmer Jr.: You can never estimate or even begin to guess what a jury is thinking once the information is already put out there. The jurors were advised to disregard that information. It's like recalling something you say in the public when it's already said. But that wasn't really the key evidence there. Billy Roy Pitts' testimony along with the other people who testified, to me, carried a lot more weight than that.

MS: What was different this time in comparison to the two previous trials?

Mrs. Dahmer: The climate in Mississippi has changed. People would not tolerate what Sam Bowers did in the 1960's. I don't think he had as many people to sympathize with him as he did then. He was grinning all through the 60's, but he wasn't grinning this time.

MS: How have the citizens of Hattiesburg responded to this verdict?

Mrs. Dahmer: Very positively. They're saying it's about time it happened. Some of them think just like I do that it should have happened a long time ago, thirty years ago.

Bettie Dahmer stands in front of the barn that her Father built and where she often played as a child.

MS: What message do you believe the conviction of Sam Bowers senda to the United States about Mississippi?

Mrs. Dahmer: That we've changed. That we've looked at the past and we've tried to make it right and correct whatever we can about the past. God has raised a young generation of people in Mississippi who have really made a difference.

MS: What do you mean when you say "It's a new day in Mississippi?"

Vernon Dahmer Jr.: We have a new generation of elected officials. Mississippi is moving forward. We have moved a long way in race relations and economic opportunities for Blacks. There are no more large scale lynchings like we saw back in the 60's. We have black law enforcement people now. We have black judges and mayors. Mississippi is a different place. Consequently, in view of all I just men-

tioned, we've come a long way. We're not there yet, but we're progressing along.

MS: Bettie, how has what took place on January 10th, 1966 affected you and your brother, Dennis, who were children at that time?

Bettie: For a long time I had a great distrust, if not overt hatred for all white people. But as I matured and aged and got to work with some folks on a one on one basis, I realized how foolish it was to hold a whole race of people responsible for the actions of a few cowards. There was no way that you could sensibly and logically hold a whole race responsible for the actions of some cowards. There are some good people in this world: good white people and there are some bad white people, just like there are some good black people and bad black people in this world. For a while I was very, very bitter. But I have gotten over that.

MS: Bettie, what does the conviction of Sam Bowers mean to you?

Bettie: I am very proud to say that I live in the state of Mississippi. I've always lived in Mississippi. I've not lived any place else. But I'm proud to say that I live in the state of Mississippi.

MS: At any time did you recognize what may have appeared to be remorse in Sam Bowers' face?

Bettie: Not when I saw him. No. Even after the jury was out deliberating. Sam Bowers walked past me and we basically glared at each other. He wasn't remorseful.

MS: What was he like? Did you ever detect any human-like qualities?

Bettie: No. He was sort of detached.

MS: Do you believe that there will ever be an apology from Sam Bowers?

Bettie: No!

Mrs. Dahmer: No!

Vernon Dahmer Jr.: No! No! I believe that Sam Bowers has enjoyed being the leader of hate. He has a following of people that still believes as he believes. Today, they see him not as a person who has been brought down; they see him as a leader who shows no remorse, stood tall and still represents very well what he believes. And I read that in his face when I saw him.

MS: Two other men have been indicted on charges for their alleged roles in the January 1966 attack. Is the family prepared to go through two more trials?

Mrs. Dahmer: Yes! Whatever it takes. We're willing to do whatever it takes to see that they are brought to justice.

MS: Are there any plans for a memorial in Vernon Dahmer Sr.'s honor in the Hattiesburg area?

Bettie: We have a memorial to my father in a park in the Black community. There is a monument there in the park that was paid for by the citizens of Hattiesburg. There is an inscription on the monument that reads, "If you don't vote, you don't count." We also have a street named after Daddy. The city has recognized him for his endeavors.

MS: Knowing Mr. Dahmer better than anyone, what would he say about the family's efforts to bring justice to those involved in his murder?

Mrs. Dahmer: Oh I knew they wouldn't quit. They would run across some problems, but they would keep on until they got their people. I didn't raise them like that. Those boys of mine would fight until the end, and they would do it through the law. They wouldn't go around trying to take justice in their hands; they would go through the court system. I knew they would do it.

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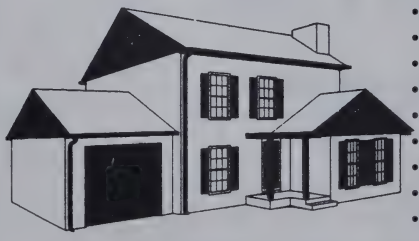

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"Fall Fun Festival" Set By Women's Resourses Committee

The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast's Committee for Services and Resources for Women will hold a "Fall Fun Festival" October 3 from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the Gulf Park Campus in Long Beach.

The event will feature food, a plant sale, a silent auction, fun run/walk, storytelling, book sale and more.

"The purpose of the committee is to support, initiate and coordinate eduction and community projects and/or events that serve to highlight issues concerning women on campus and in the Gulf Coast community," said Dr. Kay Harris, committee chair.

The Committee for Services and Resources for Women plans to use the proceeds from the festival to offer future scholarships to USMGC students and to sponsor activities during Women's History Month.

For more information about the Fall Fun Festival, contact Harris at 228-865-4511; Jennifer Blalock, 228-865-4599 or Jennifer McLauglin at 228-865-4539.

Jackson State University Develops Weather Web Site

The Jackson State University department of meteorology has developed a web site which provides view updated weather forecasts, including hurricane trackings, twice daily for the Gulf of Mexico.

The web site address, **http://santa.jsums.edu/weather_maps/mm5.html**, is the only such site at a historically black college or university (HBCU) and is one of only seven university-based sites in the nation. Weather forecast updates are provided at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.

"We follow the most interesting weather phenomenon at the time and we provide updates for all of the southern states from Florida to Texas and even Cuba," said Dr. Patrick Fitzpatrick, JSU meteorology professor.

The site which has been in operation for nearly a month requires the use of supercomputing capabilities available to JSU through the University of Mississippi.

For more information, call the JSU department of meteorology at 968-7012.

GULFSIDE CELEBRATES

Gulfside United Methodist Assembly celebrated its 75th anniversary with its fourth activity, the annual visit of members of Texas churches fellowship with members who join them from Mississippi and Louisiana.

"This annual event was started by the Texas and Mississippi churches," explained Mrs. Marian Martin, executive director of Gulfside.

Mrs. Martin explained that this was also the 50th Anniversary of *Advance for Christ and His Church,* a program that provided members the opportunity to select certain programs for sponsorship and support. Gulfside was one of the original beneficiaries of the Advance Program.

During the summer of 1947, the Jones Administration Building was destroyed by a tidal wave. It was rebuilt with funds from the Advance Program. The construction was supported by the churches in the New England conference.

"one of the things we always try to do is highlight the history, the present and the vision for the future," honor someone who has made a significant contribution to humanity and who has furthered the cause of the United Methodist Church.

Claire Collins Harvey was recognized posthumously for her generosity to Gulfside. One of her gifts is the Claire Collins Harvey Listening Room. It is located in the Longmore Inn on the first floor; and according to

Raoul Martin sings "Great is Thy Faithfulness" during Friday evening service of the anniversary weekend program.

Mrs. Martin, "It is there for people to visit, relax and meditate."

Claire Collins Harvey was a member of the Gulfside Board of Trustees and a Jackson businesswoman. She spent summers on property adjacent to Gulfside.

"Claire Collins Harvey was very generous to Gulfside," Mrs. Martin said. "The Listening Room is only one way Gulfside became her benefactor. Her furniture and other equip-

75th ANNIVERSARY

ment from the listening room in her home in Jackson were willed to Gulfside to be set up the way it was in her own home."

The August 7-9 weekend was the fourth event in a series of events in celebration of Gulfside's 75th Anniversary. Presidents of Historically Black Colleges visited Gulfside in February; The One Thousand Men in Black Bow Ties Gala followed in June; and A Thousand Women in White on October 31, will conclude the 75th Anniversary activities.

A Thousand Women in White on October 31 will honor Bishop Leontine Kelly. Attendees will be honored with the presence of Cynthia Wilson-Felder who will be "fresh" from an October 11, 1998 appearance at Carnegie hall.

"The Lord is continuing to bless Gulfside. We are looking forward, with great hope and thanks to the next century."

JSU Professor Selected As Salzburg Fellow

Dr. Curtina Moreland-Young, chairman of the Jackson State University department of public policy and administration, has been selected from among scholars and professionals worldwide to participate in the 1998 Salzburg Seminar September 26 - October 3, in Salzburg, Austria. Salzburg Fellows are mid-career professionals chosen on a competitive basis from the public sector, non-governmental organizations and academic and research institutions. Participants are invited to apply and must submit an essay, references and a resumé.

The purpose of the Salzburg Seminar sessions is to promote the exchange of ideas, experience and understanding and to build networks among professionals around the world.

Moreland-Young will participate in the seminar titled, "Higher Education: Leadership and Institutional Reform", and will be among approximately 60 Fellows who will work with a distinguished international faculty to provide a comparative forum for individuals involved in leading the higher education reform process. Faculty for the higher education seminar are top officials, including presidents and chancellors, from the University of Namibia, Tufts University, University of Cape Town in South Africa and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Unit for Higher Education Policy.

Topics of focus will include: the changing relationships betweens between funders (governments) and academic autonomy; gender and diversity issues; the potential and limitations of access; and the impact of the new technologies on distance education and university partnerships.

The seminar session consists of a series of plenary lectures, extended discussion periods with Fellows the opportunity to explore and challenge the issues presented; working groups of ten to 15 who work intensively with faculty members on specific aspects of the session themes; and informal optional meetings allowing Fellows to address additional issues that arise in the course of the session.

The higher education session will be of particular benefit to higher education professionals as institutions around the world face restructuring brought on by fiscal constraints and political and social upheavals.

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Fron left: Cheryl Lowell-Scott, Sandra Edwards, Emma Johnson and Stacy Goddard.

Sister Friend Sandra Edwards

On the eve of June 15, 1997, I was deep into my monthly indulgence of Essence magazine. i came across an advertisement for African American Women on Tour (AAWOT). It read, "The nation's foremost Black Women's empowerment conference. For women of color who need to recharge and take charge."

I was enduring the most challenging three months of my sixteen year career in the Casino Industry. A few of the issues at hand was that my boss was on maternity leave. I had to endure a company wide MIS system change and train my department, design and implement a department restructure complete with compendium adjustments, and take in a bird's eye view of the "real deal" office politics. That night I began the AAWOT registration process for my daughter and I. I dialed that 800 number like my life depended on it; and, in retrospect, it did.

The following day at work I told my sister friend Cheryl Lowell, about AAWOT and ironically she had just had her Essence evening as well, came across the advertisement, and was interested in taking the trip to Atlanta. My sister friend, Cheryl, is the most efficient organizer you will ever meet. She immediately took on the task of making our hotel and travel arrangements. The conference offered thirty powerful workshops that ran simultaneously. In addition, each day featured a keynote speaker. The conference was blessed with the motivational and life changing speeches of Susan Taylor, Dr. Beatrice Berry and Gladys Knight.

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My daughter and I were unable to attend any of the workshops, because we enrolled in the "Girls and Women's Rites of Passage". My three days involved an intense mind, spirit, and body overhaul. The theme of the Women's Rites of Passage was "Call me by my name so I can remember who I am".

Before being resented to the entire conference, my fifty sista friends and I would introduce ourselves in the closing ceremony. My new name is *Queen Sandra.* Just to give you a hint of what transpired over the weekend . . . I truly understood and accepted my full rites to the throne!

My daughter Nakia's experience was one of exploring self, sexuality, and sameness with other young sistas from all across the nation. The experience along with some coaching from other sister friends has prompted me to initiate a "Youth Rites of Passage" on the Gulf Coast in December of 1998 and prepare the girls for passage in August of 1999 during Merry Green's Black Women's Expo.

Needless to say, when we returned to Gulfport, we were floating on air and glowing with positive energy. We were ready to make a difference in our families, jobs and communities. Our co-workers were telling us we were glowing and wanted to tap into this overwhelming source.

As a result of our experience, Cheryl and I committed to each bring five sister friends with us in 1998. We exceeded our goal. There were *seventeen* African-American women from the Gulf Coast area who attended the August 1998 AAWOT in Atlanta. Ten of those sister friends were from the Ladnier Homes and were sponsored by a grant from the Sisters of Mercy, and one of my sister friends flew in from the East Coast. The phenomena addresses one of the many lessons we learned in 1997. Susan Taylor spoke about recognizing that we are co-creators with God, therefore, we must love ourselves first. We must wake up with a plan everyday and recognize the power of thought and affirmation. All that is, it was first a thought that manifested into being.

Sister Friend Cheryl Lowell-Scott

AAWOT gave me so much that it would take days for me to tell it all!!! As Black Women we are so busy being the caregivers that we do not take the time to take care of self!!! What we learned was that in order to be of optimum good to anyone, we have to first learn how to take care of ourselves first--spiritually, physically, and emotionally. The workshops that were presented taught us, through simple techniques and positive affirmations, how to do exactly that. All of the workshops were spiritually based, without being offensive to believers or non-believers. My biggest joy came from seeing and feeling the love shown by and to the 1,000 Sister Friends in attendance. Words can not express the feelings I experienced. AAWOT was a safe place where our cultural lights shone so brightly, such a wonderful sense of pride--something we have an obligation to pass on to our friends, children, and grandchildren, in

order to keep them grounded when they are faced with life's many valleys.

Sister Friend Stacy Goddard

African American Women on Tour is a conference that I would highly recommend to all women of color. Attending this conference will surely go down as one of my greatest accomplishments. Besides being motivating spiritually, professionally, and personally, this symposium gave me the opportunity to intermingle with other women that share the same fears, joys, weaknesses, and strengths that we all face.

Each speaker, different in stature but all eloquent, shared their stories both of fortune and misfortune (counting it all to joy) to help empower, encourage and strengthen us as women. My favorite speaker was Dr. Mayo Angelou. If I am being sacreligious, I apologize; but, being in her presence was the resemblance of existing in holiness (I can imagine how the disciples felt). When she spoke in her poetic way, it almost brought me to tears; but right before the tears would fall, she would say something humorous and loving which would make me smile. This was continuous throughout her presentation.

One of the things she stated that I will always remember is our ability to call on our ancestors similar to the way we call upon Deity. And how our grandmothers, great grands, and so forth were all strong women, and it is because of their strength that we are successful as a people.

Sister Friend Emma Johnson

Embarking on this trip to Atlanta with my sister friends was truly a positive and uplifting experience for me. This motivational, spiritual, and empowerment seminar permitted me not only to network with peers, but also to reaffirm my commitment to family, friends, heritage, and community.

Inspiring is the word that I would use to describe my personal experience at this conference. Dr. Maya Angelou's presentation was the pinnacle of the conference for me. Being a part of that audience, especially with the brief appearance of Corretta Scott King, was electrifying and contagious. Emotions ran the gamut from tears of anguish at memorializing the strifes of our ancestors to tears of pride and joy at their accomplishments and influence in our lives. This was an experience that will not be soon forgotten.

Maria Denise Dowd, a 36 year old sister, is the visionary and executive producer and explains what the conference means to her.

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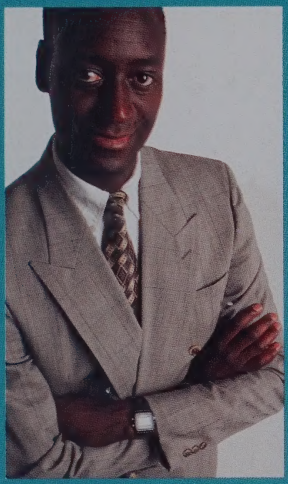

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